

# Hopeless Endeavors

by spooky123

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Summary: 'Those couple of moments of solace that feel like a lifetime as you hurtle through the atmosphere towards the ground' ODST Medical Technician Laura Anderson recalls the events of the Valhalla Offensive.

## 1. Turbulent Beginnings

**\*\*Hopeless Endeavours\*\***

**\*\*Turbulent Beginnings\*\***

When I get asked the question, "what is it like?" I struggle to come up with a descriptive answer. It isn't like skydiving because as far as I'm aware, skydiving is supposed to be an enjoyable recreational activity, which holds very little resemblance to our deployment. However 'bout two weeks ago, I had a family member ask, I can't remember who exactly, must have been a distant aunt or cousin that I've paid very little attention to. But the response I came up with was as follows "It's difficult to describe, but it's like going over the precipice of a waterfall in a canoe or kayak, like one of those adventure movies". I'd now argue that my description was very obscure and to an extent ignorant, as falling off the edge of a waterfall would be very mild in comparison.

My name is Laura Anderson, I'm an ODST, to be specific a combat medical technician. The question I spoke of was put forward to me around five days after the Valhalla Offensive, the name given to a joint UNSC assault to an outer world colony that was acting as a Covenant staging ground and dry dock. I didn't pay much attention to the briefing itself I guiltily admit, simply because the officer who was providing it had a painfully monotone voice. What I did take on board though was a insertion fleet consisting of the UNSC Aurora, Legion and Vendetta were to engage the Covenant space forces while our frigate, the Anchorage would be dropping us to the groundside base the Covenant had set up.

It was standard combat drop protocol: drop commences at approximately

eighty kilometres above the surface, airbrakes are not permitted till upper atmosphere is cleared due to expected surface to air fire. All expectations were correct because as soon as we began our pass over the drop zone the Covenant opened up with the heavy stuff, managing to sever the fuel lines on the Anchorage which made reaching the drop pod hanger slightly rocky. Once I finally reached my pod, I had to manually detach the magnetic clamps as a direct plasma hit had knocked out power and it took about ten minutes for the auxiliary generator to kick in.

Then it beginsâ€¦|

I scrambled aboard my pod as the whole ship shook and red lights rotated on the ceiling with the repetitive groan of alarms screeched. Amongst the chaos and rumbling, the calm tone of the generic, pre-recorded woman's voice spoke "All hands aboard, prepare to drop, 5 seconds". It happened all of a sudden, it always does, the pod at the far end of the rack dropped. Then the next, and the next, then it were my turn. The pod suddenly released, the kinetic energy took hold as I went into freefall. The vertical window was overly restricting; I could only just make out the horizon line. I considered it a blessing; I wouldn't have wanted to see anymore. The quiet solace of freefalling through space was interrupted by the voice again "Warning, approaching atmosphere", it was only after a brief second that the intrusive shaking and the external hull temperature metre began to increase.

This also marked the moment that the ground fire began. Several pods were completely engulfed by plasma bolts while one in particular only suffered a glancing hit, the pod spiralled out of control and ejected black smoke from its side. The whistling of the air and buzzing of plasma fire created a sort of melody that was repeated throughout the whole drop, it was mesmerising and startling at the same time. Being enclosed in that metal shell hurtling towards the ground at lightening speeds maybe the perfect idea of a stunt by some adrenaline junky, but whatever the case I can guarantee that once they're in that position they would think differently. I could now see the ground; it featured every shade of grey on the spectrum and very few definable features in the terrain, the most I made out was the iconic garish buildings the Covenant had erected amongst the dips and raised portions of ground.

The altitude metre dropped rapidly; there was a slight bump as the airbrakes activated. The pod vibrated violently and I was just able to make an estimation of where my landing zone would happen to be. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, but for a final time I was reminded abruptly by the woman's voice "Landing in 20 seconds, brace, brace, brace, braceâ€¦|" And then it happened, the pod smashed into ground tearing up the earth as the shock absorbers crunched at the base of the shell. I was momentarily deaf after impact, all I could hear was a high pitched ringing, after a moment the pod depressurised and the entire front of the shell ejected itself. I gathered myself before I lifted my harness, grabbed my assault rifle and stepped out the pod. The earth around my pod was soft and had narrow cracks running from the base of the pod to the edge of the impact crater, I staggered slightly as I gained my balance.

The battle had already begun when I reached the surface, plasma and gunfire was exchanged between the rest of my team and the Covenant ground troops. I was truly lost on this unrecognisable planet, if it

wasn't for a green smoke grenade that had caught my attention I would've wandered in the wrong direction. I sprinted towards it to find part of my drop team, there was about ten of them in total, maybe eleven, it was difficult to count in the confusion. A firefight had ensued against a Covenant hard point, just as I reached the team one of the soldiers fell back and dropped his weapon. A large, pink spike protruded from his shoulder, one of the other soldiers turned and knelt beside him "Medic! We need a Medic over here!" "Right here! Give me some cover!" I remember replying as I ran over and placed my weapon to the side and looked over the injured shock trooper.

I lifted the trooper's helmet off gently; he was young, not much older than me. I reassured him before I propped him up slightly to make it easier to remove his chest plate. The needle had penetrated his armour but missed all vital organs; I had to wrench the needle out, bandage the wound use two painkillers to get him back on his feet.

We had suffered two casualties within the first fifteen minutes of having boots on deck. This landing zone was a hopeless endeavour.

To be continued.

## 2. Heightened Velocity

**\*\*Heightened Velocity \*\***

It didn't take long to assist the fallen trooper, though his injury had rendered him unable to handle or fire his weapon. I had to quickly pack away the items as the bandages had been packed at the bottom; the first aid kit was poorly put together and not what I was normally used to. I had left my personal medical kit somewhere back on the Anchorage, during the confusion I grabbed a random one from the armoury during my way to the hanger bay. The bandage I had applied appeared to be holding, though I would need to swap it soon. Just to make matters worse, Wrotham, our radio operator was reported as MIA although I had a disturbing feeling that he was aboard the pod that got hit during the drop.

Fortunately the firefight had come to a close; one of the soldiers had managed to get a grenade behind the Covenant barricade. I could only tell as the irritating buzzing of plasma fire had ceased, my hearing was still slightly out after impact almost like being underwater. I felt a slight sense of guilt that I hadn't fired a single shot, but I quickly reminded myself I'm not paid to fight, only to make sure I can keep others doing so. I only carried a weapon as compensation. The order was given to advance; I hoisted the injured trooper who was propped up with his back against the debris we had taken cover behind onto his feet and put his arm around my shoulder.

We all moved at a brisk pace further towards the Covenant staging area, it was only then I realised I misjudged the distance that had separated our team to the firing position we had been pinned down from. As we past the enemy barricade, I remember smelling that thick, musty harsh scent that often accompanies fireworks or candles from the previously exploded hand grenade. The terrain was rough and dusty; it was more of a wasteland than anything else, not like the supposed Valhalla I was expecting during what little I caught in the

briefing. A thick cloud layer had blown over, upon further thought I realised it had probably been caused by the anti-aircraft fire.

It was only shortly after we came across our objective, the first gun emplacement. It was a large plasma battery, heavy duty, the barrel itself towered over the battlefield. Surprisingly the gun was still firing at the time; I then remembered that our cruisers were probably still engaging the Covenant space defences. This only spurred us to pick up the pace so we could relieve some pressure off the fleet. During the approach to the cannon, our team stopped and stacked up against what remained of a wall. I was relieved to put the casualty down and I think he was as well. Castor, a corporal, had seemed to assume command of our small group was preparing to advance on the gun position which stood only around fifty metres away. However none of us could've anticipated what was coming next. Upon reloading all weapons and equipment, the troopers stood up and moved out of cover into the open ground. I had mentioned to Castor, that I would remain with the injured trooper rather than dragging him to a demolition job. I was just preparing to remove the chest-plate again to replace the bandage when I heard a voice of one of the ODS'T's "Sniper! Get down!"

Like second instinct I stood up and looked over the wall, the troopers were scattered however my attention was locked onto the one lying on the floor. The process from there I must admit bordered on carelessness but I couldn't have just waited for a better moment. I grabbed my assault rifle, vaulted the wall and sprinted towards the victim. During the short journey over, I had glanced up to pick out the thin, scaly silhouette of a jackal upon the balcony that circled the gun position. When I reached the trooper he was unconscious, I found that a highly energised plasma round had pierced his thigh but I didn't stay long to make an assessment. Castor was looking over towards me like he was waiting for me to give an order; I never did understand why he didn't just pull his team out while I sorted the casualty out. After a brief moment I just shouted over towards him "Get to the objective! I'll take care of him!"

The next stage was to get the trooper to cover; I grabbed a harness strap on his armour with my left hand while I trapped my rifle between my side and elbow with my right hand allowing me to return fire to the shooter. Managing to drag the trooper back to the wall I began closer inspection which revealed that shot had blown a tunnel straight through his leg. Through the years that I have been working as a combat medic I have always considered plasma shots more forgiving for prolonging a life, simply because there is very little bleeding as the extreme heat just melts and cuts off all blood vessels and nerve endings. On the other hand, there more difficult to seal as liquid CO2 is required to meld the flesh back together. The trooper's name was Redding, I doubt I'll ever forget the name; his dog tags had been dangling outside his armour unlike the needler victim whose dog tags had been lost when I removed his armour.

After sealing the wound, Redding began to regain consciousness which was a positive sign but I didn't want him falling into shock if he looked at his wound so I tried to keep him sitting at an angle. The helpless, awkward feeling began to sink in while I tended to both troopers wounds. I felt more vulnerable by that wall, in the quiet isolation with two casualties with only the hum and hissing of the cannon every now and then to keep me company than in the firefights against the Covenant. My nervousness was probably one of my guardians

that day along with injured soldier's warning of "Behind you! Look out!" I span around on the spot to see a sole elite approaching, I scrambled away from the casualties as he opened fire. My primary concern was to get the creature away from the injured, during the fight to get to my feet I took a glancing plasma hit on my shoulder pad. The shot knocked me back to the ground, I tried to regain my breath as I crawled away to try and distance myself between the elite. For whatever reason the elite abandoned his plasma rifle at this point and activated his energy sword, I know these bastards like their glory kills.

The elite wrenched me from the floor and held me off the ground by my neck. Out of all the experiences I've had fighting the Covenant through the years, this remains and always will as one of the scariest moments I've ever endured. We all have our fears and feed them by watching those jumpy films at home, but then the fear only lasts a brief moment and its visual. While I was manhandled by this creature, the vision was mild compared to the touch and the scent. It was the first time I have ever witnessed an elite up close, I didn't take notes but the eyes were piercing and I noticed that the purple colouration armour suggests lower ranking elites. Before the alien could deliver the death blow I gained freedom by retrieving my medical scissors from my belt and forcing them into the creature's elbow. The roar it caused didn't do my already damaged hearing any favours. The elite recovered quickly, faster than I did from being dropped to the ground, I backed up with my eyes fixated on the approaching elite. Reality was realised when I stumbled back into a bullet-riddled wall. I straightened up as the elite, now only a few foot away, cocked his sword arm back and forced the sword forward.

I had closed my eyes for the final moments but the 'supposed' warm embrace of death never came. Instead there was only a searing burning sensation on either side of my neck. Whether it was miscalculation on the creatures part or I had twitched at the last moment I can't say, but the energy sword had pinned me up against the wall. Either prong was embedded deep within the wall with me stuck in-between. Through this realisation I had a sudden burst of adrenaline, I was alive. I reached up and grabbed both prongs of the sword and lifted myself up slightly, where with full force I booted the elite away from the sword which suddenly deactivated. Before I made the same mistake, I threw all my force and tackled the elite to the ground. The skirmish was ended quickly, I stood up and stepped away from the stunned elite and I reached for my sidearm and emptied the entire clip before it had a chance to recover.

As the adrenaline wore off, the pain kicked in from having been in such close proximity to the energy sword. I hadn't realised how far I had ventured away from the casualties. When I made my way back the ground suddenly began to shake violently and like a supernova, the gun emplacement exploded in an oval of purple flame and light. I could feel the heat and shockwave emit from the detonation. My assumptions that the battle was only going to get more intense from there with the arrival of the second wave were correct.

### 3. Impact Imminent

**\*\*Impact Imminent \*\***

Its peculiar how one wave of nostalgia rolls onto another. Not

necessarily chronologically, yet a constant factor remains; a longing for that time to return. I have time to think when I'm walking; back at home I would often have near misses with lampposts or other oddly placed objects in the street from daydreaming too much. The walk back to the casualties had felt like a marathon, though I was trying my best not to dawdle after still having been in shock from my previous encounter. What I had imagined as shooting stars were actually the drop pods of the second wave piercing the atmosphere.

After I scaled the small ridge separating myself to the casualties, I stumbled back slightly after seeing a conscious Redding pointing a sidearm at me as he panted heavily. I distinctly remember him saying "I'm sorry, I thought that thing was coming back". Being part of the UNSC, I had been called many things by other marines but an Elite was not among them. After kneeling down next to Redding to check the wound, I had realised that the palms on my gauntlets had seized and melted from grasping the energy sword. I clenched my fists and wriggled my fingers to try and break the hard resin that had formed. It was no good, I was forced to remove the gauntlets and carry on without.

Throughout the whole process, Redding tried to converse with me but I wasn't in the talking mood. I never am. I just coldly responded with "Yeah" and "Okay". I often get questioned about why I'm an uncaring medic; the first mistake is that I'm not uncaring just indifferent. In the past I've ran through firefights, dragged marines out of vehicles and carried them aboard pelicans, all to save their lives. Yet not once have I seen them or made an effort to speak to them after their recovery. Hands down it's an excellent work ethic and despite this, other medics seem like social workers in comparison. During the time that I had applied more Alkaline Gel to cancel out the plasma residue embedded in the flesh, a warthog had pulled up behind the wall. The driver, who looked like a racing car driver with the oversized tinted goggles grinned uncontrollably at me when I stood up. He was there to collect casualties; there was already three others in the back of the truck.

The entire logistics of moving Redding and the needler victim into the warthog was overly lengthened. This was due to the argumentative nature of Redding and how he still wanted to fight, despite being barely able to walk. When this issue was explained to him, he retorted by saying he could use the gun on the hog which he had obviously overlooked that the gun had been removed to create room for stretchers. The perceptive Redding and the younger trooper was carried back to wherever the staging area was set up. I was slow to realise that the warthog must have meant that the pelicans had managed to reach the surface.

Relocating Castor and the rest of the team wasn't a difficult job, it appeared that the team had expanded as there was much more troopers than before. They had linked up with sections two and five, yet despite the reinforcements the situation had only grown worse. Recalling the scene now, I first viewed the situation from more or less a mildly attributed vantage point. My team and the other two sections were located inside a heavily battered trench system, most likely constructed by the militia which had no doubt attempted to resist the covenant before the arrival of the recovery fleet. Beyond the trench there was the covenant and it was what seemed like hundreds of them: grunts, tanks, elites and hunters all hammering Castor's position. I sprinted down from the raised position toward

the trench, plasma landed all around me I stumbled as they impacted the ash ground. It was the final explosion from a wraith's shot that floored me as I was propelled forward.

Like too much of anything, plasma becomes sickening after a while. It sears everything in its path even the air, worse than the musty smell of freshly burnt charcoal and the hot moisture it kicks out upon impact is like being splashed by molten plastic, stinging as it sinks into fibre and skin alike. I laid on my back for what felt like a good ten minutes gazing at the shattered sky that appeared to have a dotted pattern where drop pod split the clouds. In reality the few seconds I was there, an aggressive hand wrenched me into the trench by my boot. I looked frantically around, the trench was full to capacity, troopers were crouched and hunched over only perching up to let off some rounds towards the enemy. The poorly planked floor was littered with empty magazines, cartridges and other disregarded gear. Castor beckoned at me from down the trench, on my hands and knees I crawled over the legs and other appendages of the troopers returning fire at the approaching covenant forces.

When I reached him he was barking commands at a nearby gunner almost completely oblivious to my presence next to him. He turned to me and starred for a few seconds before a nearby explosion caused everyone to flinch and resumed Castor's train of thought. Apparently according to latest intel which involved poking your head over the trench and noting what you see, the covenant has shored up here in an attempt to hinder the assault. The discussion was rather brief. "Where the hell have you been?!"

"I was hung up with the two casualties back at the gun emplacement, I'm here now!"

"We've got medics from sections two and five! Not enough supplies to look after the wounded though!"

Further down the trench in a slightly wider portion of the defensive line, troopers were strewn around lying on the floor or backed up against the trench's wall. The other two medics were concealed behind a slight incline in the dugout. The situation had escalated quickly and it appeared to only spur the covenant defence.

End  
file.